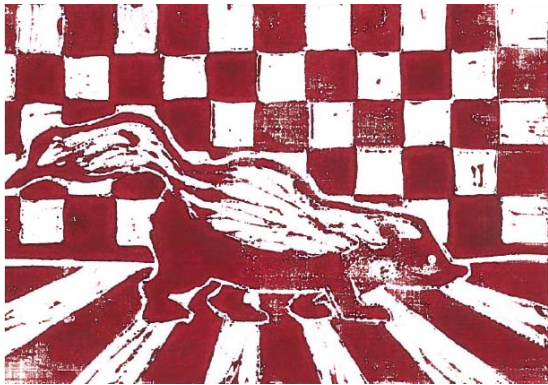


Rinsing Doesn't Help

During our recent warm spell, marked by rain in January, I noticed the distinct odor of skunk along my drive. I do not appreciate rain in January. It makes such a mess. Roads become hazardous, trees come down, and the power goes out. Even walking is not safe. In my mind, it is not supposed to rain in northern Minnesota in January.

I don't always appreciate skunks, either. We seem to be plagued by them at our place, and all 3 of our big dogs have been involved with them at one time or another.

The best skunk I ever met was one my mother put on a card. The worst skunk I've ever met is difficult to identify, because I have not enjoyed any of our encounters. There was the time a few



summers ago when I awoke in the middle of the night to a ruckus coming from the chickens. It sounded pretty bad, so I got up, grabbed a flashlight, and went to investigate. In what I had thought was a nice, tight pen, my old rooster was going wild. His two elderly banty hens were lying dead on the ground. In the dark it was hard to see everything, but I sure thought there was something black and white that did not belong in that pen.

Figuring this was clearly a job for the man, I went in to stir him from his slumber.

Being better prepared for trouble than I had been, my husband took a shotgun along. Whatever it had been, it was gone by the time he got out there. This is how it was he came to set a leg hold trap inside the pen, so that he would catch the marauder instead of our farm cats, when it came back for some fresh chicken dinner. Houdini skunk was captured the next night, but then required dispatching (the shotgun comes in again) and bad odors were the result. I'm told, but did not personally witness, that it got worse when it came time to actually remove the dead skunk from the pen for disposal. I guess this was made more difficult by the fact that the skunk had managed to entangle itself in the narrow pen mesh while trying to escape his fate, and by the fact that it did not expire cleanly, requiring several shots, each one bringing forth a fresh spraying. Sadly for the man, shooting is not recommended for dispatching skunks because it causes them to spray, but at the point at which you have a skunk woven in and out of chicken mesh, dragging a leg hold trap, I am not sure what other options you might have. Where was I? In bed with the covers pulled up over my head.

Then there was the time that Mama Dog, who had recently given birth to 3 new pups, got blasted when she stepped out for a bit. You cannot possibly bathe a dog enough to make life bearable when that dog, a treasured family member, is keeping her pups by your bedside. And did you know that every time that dog gets wet (perhaps you rinse it in the lake), for weeks into the future, you will be reminded of the folly of her ways?

And then there were the two skunks that took up residence in our barn. A totally unacceptable state of affairs, I know I should have been grateful that the skunks were dealt with, but the best

solution might not have included shooting the intruders while they were actually inside the barn. Do you know how many years it takes for the odor to completely leave? It resurfaced every spring as we cleaned out lambing pens.

All of which has led to some interesting conversations at my house. My spouse maintains that there is no good purpose for a skunk. Perhaps that is because skunk control at our place is clearly his job, not mine. I maintain that as much as I do not appreciate the smell of the defensive mechanism of our friend the skunk, you have to respect a species that is as successful this one.

There are two species of skunks in Minnesota, but one is quite rare (the spotted skunk). The striped skunk is the one we all know, primarily for its highly effective defense weapon, the powerful stinky spray. Conspicuously marked with black and white, the coloration of the skunk is considered to be a warning, and most mammalian predators do not hunt skunks. Farm dogs are evidently not that smart. Great-horned owls are skunk eaters, as they do not have much of a sense of smell. An interesting fact is that skunks are only armed with enough fluid to produce 5 or 6 sprays, and then it takes about 10 days to produce another supply. Probably few of us push things far enough to learn that.

Skunks possess an excellent sense of smell and hearing, but very poor vision. They cannot see clearly beyond about 10 feet. This explains how come we see so many of them smashed on the road.

Skunks are habitat generalists, and live in a variety of habitats, but do not do as well in heavily forested areas. The skunks I live with are benefitting by the open nature of the private farm lands interspersed with the forests of the Chippewa. They do especially well where there is plenty of edge between the two, and in fact are one of several species that reduce the breeding success of interior forest-dwelling songbirds by preying on their nests.

Skunks are omnivorous, and their diet shifts with the seasons. At times, insects comprise 70% of their diet. Holes dug in your lawn reflect the skunk's taste for earthworms. They also eat small rodents, snakes, frogs, birds, eggs, carrion, roots, berries, and the like. The skunks in my barn had a fondness for cat food, and the corn I feed my poultry is a sure draw. A primary predator of honey bees, it is written that skunks scratch at the front of the beehive and as the bees emerge, bat them out of the air to eat them. Wouldn't that be something to see?

Skunks are short-lived. Some survive 2 to 3 years, but 90% die in their first winter. Not true hibernators, skunks spend the cold months in underground dens. Males generally spend the winter alone, but there may be as many as a dozen females communally denning together, sharing body heat. During warm spells, skunks may emerge for a while. Our warmer winters are leading to more frequent sightings of skunks during winter thaws.

Skunks are predicted to fare well with climate warming. It's interesting to note that skunks were observed for the first time recently in Kuujjuaraapik, Quebec. This is the southernmost Inuit village on the east coast of Hudson Bay. Accessible only by air or by boat in late summer, you can find it on the map by following a line directly east from Polar Bear Provincial Park, across the Bay.

Climate change predictions suggest we should expect more ice rain in Northern Minnesota. You can probably expect more skunks, too. Should your dog exhibit the same enthusiasm for skunks that do mine, just bear in mind... rinsing doesn't help.

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